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140036Z Jul 05

ACTION EAP-00

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ACE-00 P-00 SP-00 IRM-00 SSO-00 SS-00 TRSE-00
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FM AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH CITY
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 1770
INFO AMEMBASSY HANOI
ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS HO CHI MINH CITY 000739

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/BCLTV and DRL/IRF

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINS](#) [SOCI](#) [KIRF](#) [VM](#) [RELFREE](#) [HUMANR](#)

SUBJECT: RELIGIOUS FREEDOM: CAO DAI: PRIEST OR PUPPETS?

1. (SBU) Summary: Leaders of the GVN-recognized Tay Ninh Cao Dai sect, a once anti-Communist, autonomous religious and social organization, maintain that they have an excellent relationship with the GVN. They praised the GVN for its support of the Cao Dai religion and said the new legal framework on religion was a significant step forward. Former Cao Dai leaders turned dissidents argue that the 1997 charter that is the basis for the group's legal recognition imposes GVN control over the organization and distorts key tenets of the religion. GVN policy towards the Cao Dai mirrors that of the Government toward the Hoa Hao and Buddhists, and is an outgrowth of the Party's desire to monitor all aspects of Vietnamese society and maintain one-Party rule. End Summary.

Who are the Cao Dai?

2. (U) The Cao Dai religion was established in southern Vietnam by Ngo Van Chieu in Tay Ninh Province in 1926. The faith is a fusion of secular and religious philosophies from both the east and west, combining Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism with Vietnamese spiritualism, Christianity, and Islam. One of the central tenets of the Cao Dai is the use of spiritual mediums including seances. At the outset, the wealth and popularity of Cao Daism gave the organization significant political and military autonomy in Tay Ninh until the 25,000-member Cao Dai army was incorporated into the Army of the Republic of South Vietnam. Like the Hoa Hao in the Mekong Delta, the Cao Dai were nationalistic, but strongly anti-Communist. Following the war, all Cao Dai lands in Vietnam were confiscated, though the Holy See compound in Tay Ninh and 400 temples were later returned in 1985.

3. (U) The Cao Dai claim six million adherents worldwide including 34 provinces in Vietnam. (Note: The Government Committee for Religious Affairs puts the number at 2.4 million. End note.) There are six different forms of Cao Daism that are officially recognized by the GVN, with another six that are unrecognized. There is little doctrinal difference between the groups, however. The principal Cao Dai organization with the majority of followers, upwards of 700,000, is centered in Tay Ninh and Ho Chi Minh City. As part of its formal GVN recognition in 1997, the Tay Ninh Cao Dai adopted a new charter, which established a 72-member Central Executive Council. The Cao Dai also have a parallel religious structure with bishops, cardinals, and a Pope. The last Cardinal died in the mid-1980s. The positions of Pope and Cardinal, which are historically filled through spiritual mediums, remain vacant as a result of a GVN prohibition on seances. The Pope and Cardinals serve as the executors of religious doctrine that is promulgated by the Executive Council. In the absence of a Pope, the Chairman of the Council, Archbishop Thuong Tam Thanh, acts as the religious executor. Tam Thanh has been Chairman of the Executive Council since 1999.

The Official Cao Dai Church Praises the GVN

4. (U) In separate meetings, Chairman Tam Thanh and HCMC Cao Dai representative Thuong Minh Thanh portrayed their relationship with GVN officials at the national and local levels as excellent. The two leaders claimed that even before Vietnam adopted its new legal framework on religion, the Cao Dai never had a problem with GVN interference in internal issues such as ordination or promotion of clergy. The new legal framework will only improve conditions for

the church as it provides more specificity for government officials in regulating religious activity. Minh Thanh also lauded GVN support for the ongoing effort to repatriate the remains of the Holy See Conservator, Pham Cong Tac, who died in Cambodia during the war. Despite GVN support since April 2004, the Cambodian government has not yet agreed to the repatriation.

15. (U) In May 2005, the Executive Council expelled five senior members of the Cao Dai church in HCMC because, according to Chairman Tam Thanh, the adherents failed to follow the instructions of the Cao Dai leadership when participating in burial ceremonies. The expelled members placed the deceased in caskets according to religious rules that existed prior to 1997. Minh Thanh added that the followers were expelled because they accused the Executive Council of changing the Cao Dai's religious rites and for sending "inciting, critical, insulting, and disrespectful" letters to Chairman Tam Thanh.

Dissidents Protest GVN "Control"

16. (SBU) In a series of meetings in his church, Cao Dai dissident Le Quang Tan (strictly protect), who serves as mentor to the ousted five, said that the expulsions were designed to cement GVN control over the Cao Dai church. Le stated that the GVN "borrows the Executive Council to deal with the people they don't like." The five expelled church leaders were protesting that the

Executive Council and the HCMC Cao Dai leadership had bowed to GVN authority on matters of internal church administration and religious practice. He and the five were demanding that Cao Daism return to its original charter, which would permit seances, dilute the power of the Chairman of the Executive Council and allow for the selection of a Cao Dai Pope and Cardinals. The GVN prohibition on seances does not allow adherents to gather religious doctrine from a supreme being. Now, the Executive Council decides religious doctrine and leadership. Separately, Tay Ninh dissident Archbishop Thuong Nha Thanh (also strictly protect) expressed similar beliefs on the 1997 charter and argued that the original religious structure would prevent GVN control over the Cao Dai. (Nha Thanh was the highest-ranking Archbishop prior to 1975. He had the authority equivalent to the current Executive Council Chairman.)

17. (U) Tam Thanh and Minh Thanh rejected arguments that the 1997 Charter fundamentally changed the precepts of Cao Daism, explaining that the only changes were administrative. While the titles of certain clergy were changed, they retained similar functions and responsibilities. They also stated that the GVN prohibition on seances is immaterial because the major principles of the religion have been passed down by spiritual mediums already and continuous use of spiritism has the potential for abuse. Minh Thanh described the change in the burial ceremony as "a small change" but stated that it still required strict compliance. Archbishop Nha Thanh agreed with this assessment that the ceremonial change was small but considered the action of the Executive Council harsh for the infraction of ceremonial procedures.

18. (SBU) Le also discussed his concerns about his deteriorating relationship with the Executive Council and Ho Chi Minh City authorities. Members of the Executive Council routinely monitor his visitors. After a visit by ConGen officers last month, Ministry of Public Security officials interviewed him on seven or eight occasions. Although very frail, the 80-year old cleric remained firm in his demand for greater autonomy, despite police pressure and threats from the Ho Chi Minh City Cao Dai Executive Council to expel him from the church where he now resides. (Le was previously the legal inspector and religious historian of the church. His position was "suspended" in 1997, when the Cao Dai adopted its new charter.)

Comment:

19. (SBU) Unlike other religious communities with a similar history of opposing the Communist Party, the official Cao Dai enjoy a somewhat more amicable relationship with the GVN. This is in large part due to the open dialogue that they have cultivated on the national level and the lack of a compelling dissenting leader. It is clear from meetings that the GVN has a quiet control over the administrative bodies of the official Cao Dai and makes it difficult to express true dissent. While the call for a pre-1997 Charter appears at first blush to be disagreement on semantics as the Executive Council Chairman represents, it can be more accurately described as a call for religious autonomy by dissenters. GVN policy towards the Cao Dai mirrors their treatment toward other organizations - establishing and monitoring its leadership - and is an outgrowth of the Party's desire to monitor all aspects of Vietnamese society and maintain one-Party rule.

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